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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses efforts undertaken to promote teaching and learning about the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights during the years leading up to and including the bicentennial celebrations of these two documents. The assessment focuses on three specific topics: (1) patterns of content coverage; (2) materials for teachers and students; and (3) methods of instruction. Most students are taught about the Constitution and Bill of Rights at least four times: (1) in a fifth-grade U.S. history course; (2) in a middle school or junior high U.S. American history course; (3) in a high school U.S. history course; and (4) in a high school government or civics course. This content coverage pattern has remained constant throughout the bicentennial period. The bicentennial period has been a time of extraordinary production of curricular materials about every facet of the Constitution and Bill of Rights in U.S. history and contemporary society. Examples of materials produced in this period are cited. Hundreds of teachers have been exposed to new teaching materials and methods through special bicentennial institutes and workshops; however, most teachers appear to rely on standard textbooks and not the materials and methods developed during the bicentennial period. (DB)

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This symposium reminds me of a conference at Indiana University in October of 1980, which, in retrospect, can be viewed as a launching pad for renewal and reform of education on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. This Indiana University conference was sponsored by Project '87 of the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, and it included national leaders in civic education, a group rather like the participants of this program. The Project '87 conference of 1980 examined the state of the art in teaching and learning about the Constitution and Bill of Rights, with the intention of identifying needs and problems and making recommendations for improvement of this vital part of civic education for democracy.[1] At that time, the upcoming Bicentennials of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, from 1987 through 1991, loomed large as an unusual opportunity to channel the inevitable public celebration toward cerebration about the principles of our constitutional democracy and about teaching them in schools.

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Today, almost eleven years after Project '87's first conference on teaching and learning about the Constitution, we have the challenge of assessing and reflecting upon what has been done for civic education during the bicentennial period. What is the status today of the Constitution and Bill of Rights in the curricula of our schools? Is it better today than it was in 1980? What has been the effect of the bicentennial period on materials and methods of instruction? My responses to these questions are organized in terms of three categories: (1) patterns of content coverage, (2) materials for teachers and students, and (3) methods of instruction.

Coverage of Content: Curriculum Patterns

Most of our students are taught about the Constitution and Bill of Rights at least four times: (1) in a fifth-grade American history course, (2) in a junior high or middle school American history course, (3) in a high school American history course, and (4) in a high school government or civics course. Many students also learn about the Constitution through elective courses in law-related education. These various courses in history, government, and law-related education involve study of the contents of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the origins and development of these documents in U.S. history, and the application of ideas in these documents to government and citizenship in the United States. The content coverage patterns of today's curricula are generally the same as they were in 1980, the year of the initial Project '87

conference on teaching about the Constitution.

Large commercial publishing companies, of course, respond to these curriculum patterns by producing textbooks that conform to them. Reviews of the current textbooks reveal problems in content coverage that are similar to shortcomings discussed in the 1980's textbook studies sponsored by Project '87.[2] Today, as in the recent past, the textbooks are long on superficial surveys of the subject and short on detailed treatments of key ideas, issues, and events. They mention many things and discuss very few, if any, of them in depth. They are encyclopedic in scope. And, rather like encyclopedias, they present numerous subjects in a fragmented fashion, without developing themes in depth to tie the pieces together from the beginning to the end of the textbook. According to Paul Gagnon, in his recent review of American history textbooks, one of the neglected or muted themes is "the saga of democratic ideas and practices" which means that our constitutional history is not treated as fully and complexly as it should be.[3]

Most shortcomings in textbook treatments of the Constitution are associated with limitations of the textbook as a medium of instruction. The surest remedy for these inadequacies, therefore, is to develop materials that teachers and students can use either in concert with or in place of standard textbook treatments of ideas and issues on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. What is the availability and the quality of non-textbook materials for teachers and students?

Bicentennial Materials for Teachers and Students

The bicentennial period has been a time of extraordinary production of curriculum materials about every facet of the Constitution and Bill of Rights in our history and contemporary society. The best of these materials are in-depth treatments of key ideas and critical issues and emphasize dramatic case studies and primary documents. Most of them have been developed through specially funded projects of non-profit educational agencies or centers, such as the Center for Civic Education, the Constitutional Rights Foundation, the Jefferson Foundation, the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University and, of course, the American Bar Association. These materials are readily available at cut-rate prices that reflect the financial support granted to their producers by private and public sources of funds.

One notable example of the impact of bicentennial-period materials on the curricula and classrooms of our schools is the "Bicentennial Competition" project of the Center for Civic Education, which was sponsored and supported by the Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution. This project has produced two six-week units of instruction, We the People and With Liberty and Justice for All, which address the origin and development of the Constitution and Bill of Rights and contemporary issues about constitutional government in the United States.[4] These materials are used as integral parts of a nationwide program that involves classes of high school students in competition to determine which group is superior in

knowledge of the Constitution and ability to articulate ideas under the pressure of a simulated congressional hearing. Since 1987, thousands of high school students throughout the United States have used these materials and participated in the "Bicentennial Competition" program. Recent congressional legislation has provided funds for continuation of this praiseworthy program beyond the bicentennial period.

In addition to the Center for Civic Education materials, more than one hundred high quality teaching and learning materials on the Constitution and Bill of Rights are described in annotated bibliographies and resource guides published by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education,[5] the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith,[6] the American Bar Association's Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship,[7] and the Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution.[8] All of these materials have been produced during this bicentennial period.

Several volumes for high school teachers and students and one excellent video program pertain to the Federalist/Antifederalist debate of 1787-1788 and highlight The Federalist papers and papers of the Antifederalists. Thus, for the first time during my long career as a civic educator, ideas in primary source materials from The Federalist are readily available in lessons for secondary school students.[9] Without the influence and support of bicentennial period programs, this kind of material for the classroom would not have been published.

Methods of Instruction

The public and private foundations and agencies that have supported the development of curriculum and teaching materials for the bicentennial period have also funded institutes and workshops for teachers to foster their effective use of the new educational resources. The Bicentennial Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, among others, have been prominent funders of programs for teachers. For example, I spent most of last week reading proposals, by and for teachers, to the Bill of Rights Education Collaborative (BREC), a joint program of the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. BREC has been granting funds for in-service education programs to disseminate curriculum materials, to train teachers in using them, and to encourage lesson plan development by classroom teachers.

During the past five years, hundreds of teachers have been exposed to new teaching materials and methods through these special bicentennial period institutes and workshops. The teaching materials and methods in these programs have emphasized intellectually active learning such as analysis of judicial case studies and primary documents, participation in open classroom discussions and debates about public issues, and performance of roles in decision-making simulations and congressional hearing simulations.

This kind of active learning with a variety of materials and methods has

been linked with higher levels of achievement in nationwide tests of achievement. For example, students with higher scores in the most recent NAEP assessments in history and civics were more likely than their less proficient peers to have reported regular involvement in intellectually active classroom lessons. The high-scoring students were the ones more involved in simulations, analysis of case studies, and classroom debates.[10]

Regrettably, most teachers appear to rely on their standard textbooks in making reading assignments and conducting daily recitations about them. Most do not use the best kinds of materials produced during the bicentennial period, which engage students in high-level cognitive activity and interaction with others in lively exchanges of ideas about constitutional issues.[11] What can we do in the years ahead to spread the use of the best teaching materials and methods developed for the bicentennial period, so that all students may enjoy the educational benefits of using them?

The Post-bicentennial Challenge

The bicentennial period has brought a bonanza of relatively inexpensive and high quality educational materials on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. However, the best of these materials are underused in our schools, because most teachers either are not aware of them or have not learned how to use them effectively. So, we face the continuing challenge of dissemination and teacher education about the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

The mission of the bicentennial projects must live beyond the bicentennial period. If not, we risk the continued underuse, perhaps even the loss, of enormous capital investment of educational resources. So, we face the challenge of sustaining, and even extending, the educational momentum and significant achievements of the bicentennial period. I trust that we have the capacity to meet this challenge in the year ahead!

Notes

1. The Project '87 Conference was conducted by the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University, October 28-31, 1980. Papers and recommendations of this conference were published in Teaching About the Constitution in American Secondary Schools, edited by Howard D. Mehlinger (Washington, DC: Project '87 of the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, 1981). Papers in this volume were authored by R. Freeman Butts, Karen S. Dawson, Peter F. Narduli, Charles J. White, John J. Patrick, Richard C. Remy, and Mary Jane Turner.

2. Paul Gagnon, Democracy's Half-told Story: What American History Textbooks Should Add (Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers, 1989). In addition, see the review of history and government textbooks by Ellis Katz in Teaching About American Federal Democracy, edited by Stephen L. Schechter. (Philadelphia: Center for the Study of Federalism at Temple University, 1985), 91-98.

3. Paul Gagnon, Democracy's Half-told Story, 149.

4. We the People and With Liberty and Justice for All (Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 1987 and 1991).

5. John J. Patrick and Robert S. Leming, Resources for Teachers on the Bill of Rights (Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1991).

6. John J. Patrick, How to Teach the Bill of Rights (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1991).

7. See various publications of the ABA Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship, such as the Teacher's Guide to the Bill of Rights Poster Series and back issues of Update on Law-Related Education.

8. The Bill of Rights and Beyond: A Resource Guide (Washington, DC: Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, 1991.

9. Empire of Reason is an award-winning video program, with a teacher's guide, on the Federalist versus Antifederalist debate. It was produced by the Law, Youth, and Citizenship Program of the New York State Bar, 1988. Lessons for secondary school students on The Federalist and Antifederalist papers have been authored by John J. Patrick. See Lessons on the Federalist Papers (Bloomington, IN: Organization of American Historians in association with ERIC/ChESS, 1988) and James Madison and the Federalist Papers (Washington, DC: The National Trust for Historic Preservation in association with ERIC/ChESS, 1990).

10. National Assessment of Educational Progress, The Civics Report Card (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1991), 83-90.

11. Ibid.